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Report urges 'respect' for environmentally sensitive

By Tom Spears
Citizen environment writer

People whose health is affected by everyday pollution must not be "dismissed as neurotic," a major workshop sponsored by Health and Welfare Canada has decided.

The federal department is mailing thousands of copies of a report to doctors across the country urging "respect and support" for patients made ill by substances that don't bother most people.

"Knowledge of environmental sensitivities should be imparted to medical students and to practising physicians," the summary of the medical workshop says.

People with environmental sensitivities suffer a variety of symptoms from exposure to small amounts of common chemicals such as tobacco smoke, perfume, food additives and cleaning products.

The symptoms can range from migraine headaches and nausea to symptoms that resemble mental illness, said Chris Brown, president of the Ottawa chapter of the Allergy and Environmental Health Association. The group has about 300 members in this area who suffer from environmental sensitivities.

Brown said some doctors have refused to recognize environmental sensitivities as a health problem with a physical cause.

"They say we're crackers," he said. "The biggest problem we face, like many disabled groups, is a lack of understanding in the community."

Many environmentally sensitive people have been put in psychiatric hospitals when their behavior could have been treated by preventing their exposure to chemicals, he said.

"We're fantastically appreciative" of the report, he said.

The workshop's summary report says patients suffer even more when doctors imply "they are imagining their symptoms, or have some vague, untreatable mental illness."

And it says doctors interested in the problem suffer a "social stigma" in the medical community.

The May 1990 workshop had 48 delegates from the Canadian Medical Association, Health and Welfare, several provincial health ministries, medical schools and major hospitals. Other recommendations included:

- Setting up a central registry of doctors trained to treat the problem;
- Ensuring that insurance companies show "no discrimination against environmentally sensitive patients with regard to payment for medication, assistive devices and other illness-related expenses;" and
- Sending more information on the problem to "other groups of doctors besides allergists."